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FM AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE
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RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 2181
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 2191
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 2150
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 1997
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS 1236
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SUBJECT: NEW TV STATION AIRS AS MEDIA ENVIRONMENT CONTINUES TO
DETERIORATE

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¶1. (U) Tajikistan's new "Simoi Mustaqili Tojikiston" or "Independent Television of Tajikistan" is a mysterious private television company which started broadcasting in June 2007. The station reportedly broadcasts to Dushanbe and surrounding areas daily for two hours in the morning and for six hours in the evening, but most Embassy contacts report that they have not managed to catch any programs since it went on the air. Voris Nazar, Deputy Director of Independent Television of Tajikistan explained to PolOff June 22 that the station's programming will consist of documentaries as well as news and cultural shows.

¶2. (U) The station's director is Zinatullo Ismoilov, the former assistant to the chairman of the Committee on Television and Radio. Independent Television of Tajikistan managed to obtain a broadcasting license on September 20, 2006. Other non-state radio and television stations have a difficult time obtaining broadcasting licenses and the committee usually explains that it will not issue any new licenses until a new law governing broadcasting regulations is passed. (Note: The U.S.-funded Internews community radio stations have faced this kind bureaucratic stonewalling over the last 12 months. End Note.) Nazar refused to explain who founded and funds Independent Television of Tajikistan and how the station managed to receive a broadcasting license.

¶3. (SBU) In a series of meetings with PolOff July 2-5, local journalists and media representatives were skeptical that the new station could be characterized as truly "independent." Although none could definitively identify the station's financier or supporter, two names surfaced frequently: Hasan Sadulloev, Chairman of Orionbank, and Murodali Alimardanov, Chairman of the National Bank. Both men are well connected and influential enough to pull strings at the Committee on Television and Radio. Both also have sufficient wealth to fund the station's start-up costs.

THE POWER OF TELEVISION

¶4. (SBU) Why would Sadulloev or Alimardanov want to start his own television company? Saodat Anvarova, Country Director of the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, explained that television advertising revenue is profitable. Another embassy source hypothesizes that the financier is actually putting himself in a strategic position to run for political office in

the future. Television is able to reach a wider audience than print media. However, most Tajiks spend little time watching the state-owned television programming which is inundated with news and video clips of President Rahmon. Because of this, local viewers turn to more entertaining satellite television, mostly from Russia. Tajik towns bordering Uzbekistan receive Uzbek television feeds. Anvarova recounted a media report of a little boy in Turson-zade, a Tajik town near the Uzbek border, who when asked who his president is, replied "Karimov" -- the Uzbek president.

15. (SBU) Sources point out that regardless of who is the founder of Independent Television of Tajikistan, it enjoys the government's blessing. Some suggest the station itself may have been created by the government in order to give the appearance that media freedom is improving.

THE DECLINE OF PRINT MEDIA

16. (U) Print media is unfortunately not as profitable as television, and since the fall of the Soviet Union, newspaper circulation has dropped precipitously. Language barriers and illiteracy, together with the end of mandatory student subscriptions and subsidized printing and transportation, have contributed to the decline of print media. Small papers that report on politics, such as Nigoh, have problems attracting advertisers. Nigoh's Editor-in-Chief, Nurali Davlatov, estimates that in order for the paper to be profitable it needs to distribute more than 10,000 copies. Distribution, in turn, presents its own problems. Tajikistan's mountains and poor transportation infrastructure prohibit widespread distribution of any one national paper. Khurshed Atoulloev of Faraj newspaper estimates that 60 percent of the rural population only speaks Tajiki, and the larger newspapers such as Asia-Plus or Avesta's Fakti i Kommentarii are published in Russian. He says that television appeals to people more because "they just have to sit and watch it."

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17. (U) Davlatov said that the quality of journalism overall has declined. The new generation of journalists trained after the fall of the Soviet Union are inadequately skilled at reporting and investigative journalism. After independence and especially after the start of the civil war, the education system in Tajikistan suffered when Russian professionals including teachers left the country en masse, resulting in a poorly-educated young population. Davlatov sighed when he noted that Tajiks no longer consider journalism a prestigious profession. Tajik journalists also practice self-censorship, and many are not fully aware of Tajik laws ensuring limited freedom of expression. This means that law enforcement will often take advantage of the general lack of knowledge about press freedom and punish journalists who push the envelope.

MEDIA FREEDOM CONTINUES TO DETERIORATE

18. (SBU) Journalists and media professionals say media freedom has deteriorated since the November 2006 presidential election. In addition to censoring themselves, many journalists respect the unwritten rules such as not criticizing government policy or the president's inner circle. (Note: Tajikistan's criminal code article 137 forbids offending or slandering the president. End Note.) City officials use excuses to threaten media organizations such as accusing them of not paying taxes or the electricity bill. Immediately prior to the presidential election, some "opposition" and information internet websites were blocked. Nuriddin Qarshiboev of the National Association of Independent Mass Media in Tajikistan reported that in late June parliament passed eight amendments restricting internet freedom. Parliament sources have confirmed this, and post is attempting to find copies of the passed legislation.

19. (SBU) Based on our recent discussions, most Tajik journalists agree that the following changes are needed to foster a freer media environment and increase public access to

independent news sources:

- An independent printing press. The largest publishing house in Tajikistan is state-run and other smaller private printing presses simply will not print controversial material.
- A private distribution company to reliably distribute and sell the newspapers instead of relying on individual street vendors. Newspaper owners say that the Tajik postal system is too expensive and unreliable.
- Increased transparency of the Committee on Television and Radio, and particularly the Commission on Broadcasting and Licensing within the committee. Media sources say the committee is considering changing the regulations to categorize frequency waves as state secrets which would make it more difficult for media organizations to apply for frequency waves to broadcast.
- A government strategy for developing the mass media industry in Tajikistan. The current technique of imposing legislation in an attempt to regulate the industry ends up restricting media freedom.

¶10. (SBU) Two other large-scale improvements to support media freedom include:

- Improved infrastructure links to enable news to reach remote regions; and
- Constant electricity to allow people to watch television or access internet more often.

¶11. (SBU) COMMENT: Independent Television of Tajikistan may not be completely independent, but it is a privately run station. If the station succeeds commercially, it may spur other investors to consider opening media outlets to create a stronger industry that can stand up to government pressure. However, the government's watchful eye and heavy hand on the media even after the presidential election is concerning. Short of a reversal of the government's heavy-handed policies to keep journalists scared and timid, Tajikistan's electronic media will likely not become a source of independent news or open debate. Similarly, in an age of declining literacy rates and increased government scrutiny, it is unlikely Tajikistan's print media will flourish. END COMMENT.
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